

Testimony of Noa Emmett Aluli, M.D.
Senate Indian Affairs Committee
Oversight Hearings on Protection of Sacred Places
June 4, 2002

Aloha Mr. Chairperson and members of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee my name is Dr. Noa. Emmett Aluli and I am physician in primary care on the Hawaiian island of Moloka'i, the Medical Executive Director of Moloka'i General Hospital, a founding leader of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana and Fund, and the past chairperson of the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning before this committee regarding the protection of "Wahi Pana" or Hawaiian Sacred Places.

I would like to share the thoughts of the late Edward Kanaha on "Wahi Pana" or Hawaiian Sacred Places to more fully describe the significance and meaning of such places to Native Hawaiians:

The sacred places of Hawai'i or wahi pana of Hawai'i, were treated with great reverence and respect. These are places believed to have mana or spiritual power.

For native Hawaiians, a place tells us who we are and who is our extended family. A place gives us our history . . . and the history of our ancestors . . . a place gives us a sense of well being.

A wahi pana is a place of spiritual power, which links Hawaiians to our past and our future.

Our ancestors honored the earth and life as divine gifts of the gods. In fishing and farming wahi pana were respected. Their activities never encouraged or allowed overuse of the resources of the land or the sea. To do so would dishonor the gods. 'The earth must not be desecrated' is a native Hawaiian value.

The inventory of sacred places in Hawai'i includes the dwelling places of the gods, the dwelling places of their legendary kahuna, temples, and shrines, as well as selected observation points, cliffs, mounds, mountains, weather phenomena, forests, volcanoes, [lava tubes, pu'uhonua or places of refuge and burial sites] . . .

All wahi pana need our protection and our respect - not only for their historical significance but also for their human significance. (Edward Kanaha in Ancient Sites of Oa'hu by Van James, 1991, pp. ix-xiii)

Today, Kaho'olawe, is helping our present generation understand the importance of respecting and honoring our traditional wahi pana.

For 18 years, beginning in 1976, the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana led the Native Hawaiian and general public protest to end the desecration of Kaho'olawe. 'Ohana members persevered to oversee the Island's cultural and natural resources despite personal and collective sacrifices.

In 1980 the role of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana as Ke Kahu O Ka 'Aina or steward of the Island was acknowledged in a court ordered Consent Decree with the U.S. Navy. The entire island of Kaho'olawe was listed as a historic property on the National Register of Historic Places. We were allowed access to the Island for religious, cultural, educational and scientific activities. Since then, the 'Ohana has taken over 14,000 visitors to Kaho'olawe. Our treasured kupuna(elders) and kamali'i(children) from every island join in the re-discovery of our sacred island. We re-dedicate our ancestors' shrines, temples and places to conduct religious ceremonies; we clear access routes to these places; and we care for and protect burial sites. The 'Ohana conducts the annual celebration of Makahiki or harvest ceremonies to Lono, god of agriculture, across the island each November and January.

Through the course of this spiritual journey, an entirely new image of Kaho'olawe as a sacred island has emerged. According to Native Hawaiian kupuna, the island was originally named, Kanaloa, the name of the Hawaiian god of the ocean. Hawaiian ancestors respected the island as a physical manifestation of Kanaloa. It is the only island in the Pacific named for a major god. It was also named Kohemalamalama o Kanaloa that can be translated as the shining birth canal of Kanaloa or as the southern beacon of Kanaloa. Both names link the island to its role as a traditional center for the training of celestial navigation between Hawai'i and Tahiti.

Finally, on October 22, 1990, President George Bush directed then Secretary of Navy, William Cheney, to discontinue use of the island for bombing and target practice. In November 1993, the U.S. Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed an act which recognized Kaho'olawe as a national cultural treasure and permanently stopped the use of Kaho'olawe for any military training. On May 9, 1994, the U.S. Navy formally returned the island to the State of Hawai'i.

The experience with Kaho'olawe has led us to understand the importance of expanding the assessment of "wahi pana" to include our activities as Native Hawaiians to provide stewardship over and practice our religion connection with these places honored by our ancestors as sacred to our deities. Thus, cultural and environmental impact assessments and studies must include, but not be limited to:

1. Ancestral relationship of Native Hawaiians to "wahi pana" or sacred Hawaiian sites.
2. Necessity of access to "wahi pana" or sacred Hawaiian sites in order to fulfill responsibilities of stewardship.
3. Importance of sustaining the integrity of natural resources as part of the integrity of a sacred site.
4. Importance of sustaining the quality of experience, including view planes and quiet in and around "wahi pana".
5. Whether proposed uses would generate a change in the condition, integrity, use, function, alignments, ownership, boundaries, access to or change in the quality of the experience.

In the course of conducting a cultural impact assessment and study it is necessary to conduct interviews with families and practitioners who have a relationship with and take responsibility for the "wahi pana" or sacred place. These families and practitioners must also be

parties to any joint use agreements at memoranda of understanding that may guide the future use of the particular sacred place. Such agreements must allow for the families and cultural practitioners to have access to the "wahi pana" in order to monitor, care for, protect and sustain a relationship with the sacred place.

I am hopeful that these suggestions can be considered in strengthening the protection of sacred places in federal law.

Finally, these hearings are timely in that the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program is presenting, from June 5 through September 2, the exhibit "Kaho'olawe: Rebirth of a Sacred Hawaiian Island" at the Arts and Industries Building on the National Mall. This comprehensive exhibit tells Kaho'olawe's unique story - from its legendary beginnings to current efforts of protection and revitalization. Finally, after an 18-year struggle (1976-1994), to reclaim sacred Hawaiian land, Kaho'olawe has been recognized as an important national treasure for restoration into a cultural reserve.